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Post-socialist Migration Systems and Emerging Immigrant Destinations in Eastern Europe

This paper explores the emergence and development of a global socialist migration system during the middle and late Soviet period and its legacies in post-Soviet Ukraine. First, it sketches the regulatory regimes of labor, student, and asylum migration to the late Soviet Union (Light 2016; Siegelbaum and Moch 2014) that persisted despite Soviet isolation through political, cultural, as well as formal and informal trade ties that spanned parts of the “Second World” and “Third World” since the late 1960s. It then centers these processes in the a) differing late Soviet international relations with Ethiopia, Palestine, and Afghanistan, and b) the emerging transnational migrant communities in early Soviet Ukraine (Ruble 2003). Using oral histories with longtime Ethiopian, Palestinian, and Afghan refugees recorded in 2009-2012, it next shows how exiles, dissidents, and war refugees in the aftermath of the collapse of state socialism looked to these transnational networks as a trusted site in search of safe refuge. The focus on the highly-regulated origin of the ties of Soviet “international friendship” in satellite states and socialist movements abroad highlights how these strong ties expanded into a network of supportive weak ties within and across several generations of newly-settled communities of students, professionals, traders, and especially refugees from a small but diverse (83 countries) population of asylum seekers in independent Ukraine (see Shevel 2011).

As part of a broader project, this paper concludes by parsing out the historical antecedents of such of migration systems (Fawcet 1989, Gurak and Caces 1992) in the context of shifting borders, as linked to but distinct from global labor migration systems such as East-West “transit migration” into the European Union (Düvell 2012).